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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MADRID 000827

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PTER PREL ASEC SP OSAC

SUBJECT: SPAIN'S 9-11: ETA MASSACRE IN MADRID THREE DAYS
BEFORE ELECTION, DEATH TOLL UPWARDS OF 173

REF: (A) MADRID 679 (B) MADRID 712

Classified By: A/DCM Carol Urban per 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) ETA terrorists struck March 11 in the center of Madrid, placing bombs on four commuter trains. There were a total of 13 explosions (including three police-controlled explosions to deactivate bombs.) The bombs exploded in the middle of rush hour, from 0835 to 0855 local. Interior Minister Acebes confirmed that the GOS had "no doubt" that ETA was responsible. He also confirmed that there were no advisory calls before the bombs went off. The death toll continues to mount. According to Acebes and other official sources, the death toll was 173, with more than 600 wounded. FM Ana Palacio also commented to the press that ETA was responsible, as did Popular Party candidate for President of the Government, Mariano Rajoy.

¶2. (C) As noted in reftels, ETA experts in the Spanish police, as well as other Spanish officials, had expressed concern to us that ETA would seek to strike before the March 14 general elections. Our contacts said ETA would seek to strike during the high profile election campaign to demonstrate that, despite suffering unprecedeted arrests and disruption, it had not given up. In the past two months, police have had success in disrupting two major ETA attempted attacks. On February 29, two ETA operatives were arrested about 100 miles east of Madrid. One was driving a truck laden with 536 kg of explosives, destined for detonation in Madrid. On December 24 police stopped an attempt by two ETA operatives to place backpacks laden with explosives on a train going from Irun (Basque region) to a Madrid train station. Acebes said that this demonstrated ETA had been looking for a spectacular attack, with major civilian casualties. He added: "I will not accept the intolerable assertion by those who try to divert the culpability to other groups."

¶3. (SBU) As a result of these and other police operations, and the arrest of 126 ETA operatives and accomplices in Spain in 2003, ETA had not killed anyone in a terrorist attack since May 2003. The total of three ETA killings for 2003 was the lowest figure in ETA's history (apart from brief periods of unilateral "cease-fire"). Prior to this attack, ETA's highest number of victims in a single attack was in Barcelona in 1987 when ETA exploded a bomb in a Hipercor shopping center, killing 21. (ETA claimed that it did not intend to kill so many civilians at Hipercor but that there had been a problem with the warning call.) Apart from this, several ETA attacks caused 10 or 12 fatalities, often against police targets. But ETA had more typically targeted its victims more discriminately, generally killing one or two at a time. The total number persons ETA had killed, before the March 11 Madrid attack, was about 850.

¶4. (C) This attack comes only three days before March 14 general elections. Both major political parties have canceled campaign events, including major end of campaign rallies scheduled for March 12. A spokesman for ETA's political arm, the de-legalized party Batasuna, Arnaldo Otegi, claims that the attack could not have been by ETA since, he claimed, ETA phones in ahead of time. Otegi attributed the attack to Islamic extremists. President's Office contacts have called us to stress that the GOS is sure that the perpetrator is ETA, as Acebes has stated emphatically. They request that the USG support this in its declarations and not express any doubt in public comments about the party responsible.

¶5. (SBU) The Ambassador has called King Juan Carlos, FM Palacio, Madrid Region President Aguirre and President Aznar's Office to express our solidarity with Spain. FM Palacio made a point in her conversation with the Ambassador in objecting to media use of the term "Basque Separatists" to describe ETA. Now more than ever, she stressed, ETA must be called only by the name of "ETA Terrorists." The Ambassador will also write letters to Interior Minister Acebes, the Mayor of Madrid, and other senior officials.

¶6. (C) Comment: The magnitude of death and injuries caused by the attack is unprecedented in ETA's history and is, by far, the worst terrorist attack Spain has suffered. The

fact that there was no warning call combined with massive civilian casualties represents a major departure in ETA's modus operandi. The two foiled attacks mentioned (para 2) above indicate that ETA was already changing its tactics in favor of indiscriminate attacks. As per reflets, an ETA under intense police and judicial pressure and lacking in technical skill for pinpointed attacks appears to have decided to lash out, not unlike a wounded animal, to cause maximum civilian harm. As far as the political campaign is concerned, Mariano Rajoy and the Popular Party, have made waging the war against ETA, without compromise or dialogue, central to their campaign. An ETA attack, even this enormous one, should thus not work against the governing party. However, if ETA's political wing (the de-legalized Batausna) is able to seed doubt about the perpetrator, some might blame the PP government for exposing Spain to Islamic extremist terrorism because of its Iraq policy. Hence the call to us from Moncloa for the USG to be clear in public comments that the perpetrator of this tragedy is ETA.

ARGYROS